

First-Generation College Students: A Study of Appalachian Student Success

By Christie Hand and Emily Miller Payne

Payne...defines poverty as the "extent to which an individual does without resources."

ABSTRACT: *First-generation students represent a crucial population in institutions of higher education. Often considered "at-risk" in academic persistence and retention discussions, these students present both a challenge and opportunity to postsecondary education. This study focuses on a subgroup of first-generation students, those from Appalachia, and the factors contributing to their academic persistence.*

The participants were students from the Student Support Services program at a major Appalachian university. The phenomenological method was employed, enabling the themes to flow from the data rather than being presupposed by the researcher. The themes (factors) emerging from the students' experiences were the importance of home culture and family, financial concerns, significance of an internal locus of control, relationships and emotional support, and communication of information. Each of these has shown a definite impact on the students' academic persistence.

The education level of parents is a major factor in the high school student's decision of whether to go to college or not. According to Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) students are much more likely to attend college if their parents did. For students whose parents did not attend college, the college-going process is particularly challenging. Getting students, especially first-generation students, to enroll in college is difficult, and, to keep them in college, the battle continues. Green (as cited in Noel, 1985) states that "stable enrollments ultimately depend on the retention of currently enrolled students as well as the steady inflow of new students" (p. 3). Thus, it is logical for an institution to invest in retaining its students, particularly those who are considered at risk such as first-generation students.

Traditionally, "first generation" has meant that neither parent has graduated from college. However, a more helpful definition, and the one used for the present research, is that neither parent has even enrolled in college (Harrell & Forney, 2003). London (1992) contributed significant research to the discussion of first-generation college students, concluding that they

"live on the margins" (p. 7). They do not want to break with the past but aren't fully accepted into the new culture. Often first-generation students try to become independent but are bound to their parents; a relationship of dependency develops, which produces feelings of guilt in the child when he or she leaves the parents to attend college (London, 1989). Examples of the struggles of first-generation students can be found in all classes of society but are most often found in low socioeconomic groups and minorities, particularly Hispanics and African Americans (Gladieux & Watson, 2000; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). The focus of the present study is the Appalachian region particularly because of the challenges this region faces in its economic development and college-going rates.

According to the Appalachian Region Commission (ARC) "Appalachia" stretches along the Appalachian Mountain Range, encompassing all of West Virginia and portions of 12 other states, from New York south to Mississippi (Appalachian Regional Commission, n.d.). It is a largely rural area which has traditionally faced challenges of poverty, low rates of white-collar employment, and low rates of college attendance (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Matvey, 1987). A priority for the region is to increase participation in higher education in order to create a more educated workforce (Chenoweth & Galliher). Statistics reveal a direct link between educational achievement and economic development. In 2000, 17.7% of the Appalachian adult population had a college degree, compared to 24.4% of the U.S. adult population (ARC, 2004). According to 2002 figures, the average per capita income in Appalachia was \$25,470 compared to the U.S. average of \$30,906 (ARC, 2005). In the U.S. Census Bureau's 2006 American Community Survey, the state where the study was performed ranked #5 in the percentage of people living below the poverty level (17.3% as compared to the U.S. average of 13.3%).

U.S. Census Bureau statistics measure poverty only in terms of financial criteria. Ruby Payne (2005), however, in her book *Framework for Understanding Poverty*, defines poverty as the "extent to which an individual does without re-

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sources" (p. 7). In addition to financial resources, she discusses several other resources: emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships/role models, and knowledge of hidden rules. As will be explored later in light of the study results, the discussion of resources gives an important perspective to the success of first-generation students.

Appalachian Historical and Cultural Considerations

Over the decades theorists have attempted to find plausible explanations to the question of why the Appalachian region has lagged behind economically, culturally, and academically. Matvey (1987) described two prevailing theories: (a) internalism, claiming that the problems are internal to the region due to cultural and geographic considerations and (b) relationalism, blaming the problems on relations between regions and between classes. He concluded that relationalism is the more plausible theory, claiming that poverty and underdevelopment are the result of backward work and social relations in the coal industry, unequal class structures, and poor management. The local inhabitants feel powerless to initiate change when faced by capitalist hegemony (Gaventa, 1980). Gaventa concludes that "time, of course, has brought changes in the [Appalachian] Valley—of technology, of culture, of social life—but, in the flux, the basic patterns of inequality and the supporting patterns of power and powerlessness have persisted, if not grown stronger" (p. 252).

Although Matvey emphasizes the economic aspects of Appalachian culture, Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) explain the culture in terms of a sense of belonging, focusing on localism, historicism, and familism. Localism describes the sense of attachment that Appalachians have to the place where they were born and grew up. Baldwin (1996) describes this aspect of localism as "cultural place-boundedness" (¶ 11); people want to stay in the same area where they grew up. Chenoweth and Galliher found that these factors exert an influence on both whether students decide to attend college or not and where they attend college. They are much more likely to attend college if their parents, or even aunt or uncle, had attended college (the effect of familism), and they tend to stay close to home (localism).

Methodology

This research was conducted using the phenomenological approach, seeking to find the underlying meaning of the experience of being an Appalachian first-generation college student,

particularly focusing on the factors which affect their academic persistence. Phenomenological study allowed the researcher to get at the essence of the individual experience and at the same time derive universal meaning from the shared individual experiences (Creswell, 1998, p. 53). By using the phenomenological method, this research was able to focus on the essence of what it means to be an Appalachian first-generation student.

In a phenomenology, the researcher must state his or her assumptions and then bracket them in order to better understand the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 1998). Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997) state that "bracketing is a suspension of theoretical beliefs, preconceptions, and presuppositions" (p. 47). Thus before beginning the study, I recognized my preconception that first-generation students often struggle with the college experience and attempted to describe objectively the participants' experiences.

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Participants

The study began by identifying research participants in the Student Support Services at a major university. Student Support Services (SSS) is the federally-funded TRIO program which is particularly concerned with the retention of low-income and first-generation college students. The goal of SSS is "to increase the college retention and graduation rates of low-income, first-generation college students and students with disabilities and to facilitate their transition from one level of postsecondary education to the next" (U.S. Department of Education, 2004, p. 1). The SSS grant received by the study's institution provided 200 students with opportunities of tutoring, academic advising, counseling, and student activities.

The director of Student Support Services emailed the students who fit the research criteria (first-generation, from the Appalachian state of West Virginia, and with at least two college semesters completed), and asked them to pick up a survey in the SSS office if they were interested in participating in the study. One hundred and twenty-one students were contacted, and 21 filled out a survey.

Instrument

In keeping with the phenomenological method, the survey did not force responses but structured questions which allowed for freedom of response. Questions were asked regarding students' ability to participate in the study, the education level of parents, where they grew up, length of time at the university and in the SSS program, and involvement in campus programs. Students were also asked to rank factors which have affected their academic success, such as relationships with family members, peers, and faculty/staff; attitude and motivation level; academic performance; and participation in Student Support Services and other student organizations. Finally, they were asked to rate how successful they felt they were as a college student and how difficult they felt college was. Although these ranking and rating questions were more limiting than the open-ended questions, several options were available and the interview provided an opportunity for follow-up.

Procedure

Out of these 21, 16 students were chosen whose parents had attended no college and therefore met the study's criteria as first-generation college students. In the end, five males and four females were interviewed including one African American and three nontraditional students. Prior to each interview, each participant signed the consent form and agreed to an audio recording. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to 1½ hours. Eight of the interviews with students and the interview with the Director of Student Support Services took place during the fall semester. The final student interview was held in January, a few weeks into winter/spring semester. As with the survey, interview questions were designed so as not to influence the results. Questions were open-ended in an effort to elicit honest, elaborate responses. The interview guide was also just that, a guide and not a formula; all the questions were covered in each interview, but sometimes it was necessary to depart from the prescribed order or to ask clarifying or follow-up questions based on the flow of conversation. Questions were grouped into three categories: making the decision to go to college, persistence in college, and the significance or essence of being Appalachian.

The participants had been asked early in the study if they would participate in a focus group at a later date; each said they would. The focus group was held at the end of January, a few weeks into their new semester. Only five of the nine students were in attendance, a result of scheduling conflicts. The focus group provided an opportunity for the students to interact on the same topics which were covered during the

interviews, allowing for new perspectives and also the confirmation of theories being formed based on the initial data.

Through the interviews, transcription, and reflection time, the researcher had already become familiar with the material and had begun to notice prominent factors emerging from the data. Six factors (later collapsed to five) were chosen and each matched with a color, which was used to highlight the interview data. After highlighting the interview data using this color-coded scheme, the factors were revisited to verify that the major themes were flowing from the data and were in keeping with the phenomenological method of looking for meaningful common experiences. In addition, significant statements were identified and organized into "meaningful units" (Creswell, 1998, p. 150) or primary factors.

The findings were verified in several ways, according to Creswell's (1998) recommendations. Member checks were accomplished with the focus group, in an effort to confirm themes and conclusions. Rich, thick description was realized through detailed description and using the participants' own words. Triangulation was accomplished by comparison of conclusions based on multiple data sources and in comparison to research in the literature review. Finally, the data were not skewed to fit any preconceived themes. As an example, the literature had indicated that first-generation students might have strained family relationships; that contrast between the literature and the findings of this study were acknowledged.

Findings

In order to help the reader understand the students being interviewed, a short profile of each student follows; the number of semesters completed or academic classification is given as of the date of the interview. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this section.

Participant Profiles

Craig. A nontraditional student from a rural Appalachian community. He was raised by his grandparents who did not finish high school. He was in the military before enrolling at the university and has attended on and off for 3 years. He is Jill's long-term boyfriend.

Jenny. A traditional student from a rural Appalachian community. Her parents are high school graduates, and one brother dropped out of the university. She has completed 5 semesters.

Jill. A nontraditional student from a small Appalachian town who has spent several years working at various jobs. Her parents graduated from high school. She has completed 2 semesters

at the university. She is Craig's long-term girlfriend.

John. A traditional student who grew up in rural Appalachia. His parents both have high school degrees. He has completed 3 semesters of college.

Josh. A traditional student from rural Appalachia. His mother completed 9th grade and his father completed 8th grade. He has completed 5 semesters at the university.

Luke. A traditional student who grew up in rural Appalachia. He is classified as a junior at the university. His parents are high school graduates, and his siblings have college degrees.

Martha. An African-American traditional student who grew up in an Appalachian town. She has completed 3 semesters at the university. Her mother and sister got their GED.

Michael. A nontraditional student from rural Appalachia, having spent time in the military and a Vo-Tech school before coming to the university. His parents are high school graduates.

It is crucial to note the [factors] interact with one another often in causal relationships.

He has completed 7 semesters.

Sarah. A traditional student who grew up in rural Appalachia. She has completed 5 semesters at the university. Both parents graduated from high school. Her siblings are also in college.

Primary Factors

The primary factors affecting academic persistence which emerged from this research are the importance of the home culture and family, financial concerns, internal locus of control, relationships and emotional support, and communication of information. Although these factors will be discussed separately, it is crucial to note that they interact with one another often in causal relationships. For example, the research is clear that because a student's parents have not attended college, they are more likely to be low-income and have inadequate information regarding the college experience (Harrell & Forney, 2003; Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini, 2004; Somers, Woodhouse, & Cofer, 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996).

It is also important to recognize that the student who will voluntarily fill out a survey indicating a willingness to be interviewed tends to be the more motivated and successful student. This was noted by the director of Student Support Services and is evident in the results.

The importance of home and family. As Chenoweth and Galliher (2004) put forth, Appalachians have a strong sense of belonging to the family, the land, and the history present in both family and land. Most university students struggle between independence and loyalty to home and family. Appalachian students, however, seem to experience this conflict more acutely. Many of the students interviewed said that they would leave home for graduate school or to get a job, but that they would probably come back or live in a neighboring state. When asked where he would settle, Josh said, "With what I'm doing, there's not much of a job market here. I was thinking more of Virginia probably. Then I'm still close to home..." Jenny has already moved around a lot in her life, but said, "It would be weird to live where there aren't any mountains. It would be hard to be really far away from my family." Several other students said that if they left, they would miss the mountains. John's mother would like him to attend the local community college so he could live closer to home. Luke, expressing the sentiment of several of the students, said, "I honestly don't think I could ever leave his area; I've lived here all my life. I could leave, but I'd be home a lot." It is interesting to note that all of the students interviewed live within a couple hours of the university. Although this university is the largest and most prestigious postsecondary institution in the state, it still seems to attract primarily local students.

Only Craig expressed a feeling of alienation from his family because of his decision to go to college. Most felt emotionally supported by their parents and were expected to attend college. Michael said, "Anything and everything that I do in college is supported 100% by them. They show their appreciation for what I'm doing by being there for me anytime I need anything." Josh said, "Oh, yeah, my parents were so thrilled. They're so happy that I'm here and doing well." Several parents had short phrases of encouragement or advice which some of the students quoted. Luke quoted his mother as saying, "If there's one thing people can't take away from you, it's an education." He said his parents did not force him to go to college, but "subliminally messaged me into doing it." Sarah quoted her dad as saying, "The more you learn the more you earn!" She said that her parents did not tell their children to go to college, but instilled in them the importance of it.

London (1989) describes first-generation students as acting as "delegates" of the family, realizing the unfulfilled dreams of the parents. The Director of SSS, Barbara Copenhaver-Bailey (personal communication, December 2, 2005),

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refers to these students as "golden children"; they are chosen by the parents to fulfill their mission. Several of the students interviewed could fit the description of "delegate" or "golden children." Luke is referred to by his siblings as "the chosen child" and Michael gets "bragged up a lot" by his parents. These parents want something better for their children and the students don't want to "end up like their parents" in low-paying jobs. Jenny described her father as frequently exclaiming, "You need to go to college! You need to do good in school now so you can get a better job than we did." Josh said, "My parents are very low income; there were a lot of times when we would struggle financially. That's something that I didn't want to have to go through and put my kids through." Similarly, Jill exclaimed, "I see how my mother lives, and I've done factory work. I've had years of experience doing that on and off, and you can only earn six, seven, or eight dollars an hour." She does not want her children to have to struggle in the same way that she and her sisters have.

Financial concerns. As indicated earlier, being low income is often connected to being first-generation and being Appalachian. Terenzini et al. (1996) claim that "first-generation students are more likely to come from low-income families..." (p. 17), and researchers of Appalachia assert that Appalachia is faced with poverty, low rates of white-collar employment, and low rates of college attendance (Chenoweth & Galliher, 2004; Matvey, 1987). The students participating in this study all have financial concerns. Jill, a 27-year-old nontraditional student, spoke of going home to visit and her mother apologizing for not being able to give her money: "If I had money, I'd give it to you." Jill wants to break the cycle of poverty, saying, "You're in a poor family, most of the time it's going to be that way. You have to break the cycle. I'm trying to break the cycle." Unfortunately, Jill and her boyfriend, Craig, had to drop out of school the following semester because of lack of money.

All the students but one work in order to pay bills (even if they have scholarships and loans for room and board), affecting their ability to be involved in campus organizations. Sarah has a work-study job on campus and also works at Dollar General. She gets frustrated because she can't get to homework until after 9:30 or 10:00 at night, and feels that she could get a 4.0 if she didn't have to work. She said, "My roommate from first year, she's kind of like a rich girl from Chicago and she doesn't understand why I have to have a job." Josh has a work-study job in the Student Support Services office. He felt that the biggest barrier to entering college was paying

for it; now it is more incidental expenses that are stressful. He said, "A lot of times when you have to spend a little bit of money here and there, like on books; that's a little rough sometimes."

Most of the students have financial assistance through the PROMISE scholarship (the state merit-based scholarship which covers all tuition), Veteran's Administration, or other grants and loans. The Director of SSS (personal communication, December 2, 2005) has said that financial pressure exerts extreme stress on the students. When counseling them at the beginning of the semester, she and her staff sit down with students and discuss their needs; she has found that before even discussing academic needs, she first must ask the basic questions: "Do you have food?" or "Are you good with your landlord?"

The students also recognize that the difference between working class and middle class is defined not only in financial terms but also in quality of life. In the focus group discussion, Craig compared his uncle, a miner with a decent

"I don't feel like I really have any [barriers] besides myself. I'm the only person who can stop me from continuing."

income, to his cousin who is college-educated but earning half the uncle's income. His uncle ridicules his daughter (the student's cousin) for having a college degree and not making much money, saying "You're wasting your d--- time and went into debt just for a bunch of useless information." Craig noted that at least her profession will not kill her.

The students acknowledge the fact that a college education means more than just financial success, saying that it "helps you learn about yourself and be a well-rounded person"; however, most of the informants are still enrolled at the university in order to be more financially successful. Several of the students persist partly because they are afraid of losing their financial aid. John, Jenny, and Martha are on the PROMISE Scholarship and they know that if they get bad grades or drop out a semester, they will lose it. Jenny ended her first semester with a 1.90 GPA. To keep her scholarship, she said, "I had to take 20 credit hours in the spring and a summer class and raise my GPA...I was terrified because if I couldn't keep it, I couldn't go."

Internal locus of control. According to Grimes and David (1999), students with an internal locus of control will accept responsibility

for their own actions, realizing that their academic achievement is under their control. On the other hand, students with an external locus of control see their circumstances as beyond their control. Bean and Eaton (2001-2002) assert that "where locus of control is internal, we expect students' motivation to study and to socialize to be high. We believe that these efforts will lead to academic and social integration" (p. 77). Similarly, Pintrich (2003) claims that there is a positive correlation between internal motivation and better academic performance.

The students' sense of responsibility for their own success was evident throughout each of the interviews. When asked what it takes to be successful in college, invariably they gave responses such as "determination," "focus," "motivation," and "knowing your goal." Josh replied, "Determination, trying your hardest, doing whatever it takes to get the grades you need... I just keep myself motivated." Michael replied, "Focus. Definitely have to be focused and self-motivated. You have to be driven. That's how I approach every day." Martha responded to the question in terms of barriers to success, saying "I don't feel like I really have any [barriers] besides myself. I'm the only person who can stop me from continuing. So I just have to have the motivation, be determined to finish. I'll never drop out, maybe let my grades drop, but never drop out."

The informants never cited external factors like luck, good teachers, or enough money as their motivation. Sarah summed up the student's responsibility saying, "If kids go to college just because their parents want them to, I don't know if they're going to be able to deal with it... You have to do it for yourself." Luke agreed, saying, "I think students blame the university when it's ultimately their fault for being lazy and not doing their part... I'm like 'the university has done what they're supposed to to get you through; now you just go out and do your part!'"

Many of these students have friends who have dropped out; they recognize that external factors such as lack of money or a difficult family life play a role in their failure to persist, but they know that ultimately the responsibility is their own. This was most evident with Craig who faced financial obstacles and intense family pressures. When asked what keeps him going, he said, "I have always been a bit of an optimist and I show no fear. I have read in the past that what prevents most people from advancing in life is fear. The fear of trying, the fear of failure." He has been fighting to maintain a strong internal locus of control but, at the same time, has battled circumstances often beyond his control.

The students' ability to regulate their own

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learning as discussed in Schunk (1990) further demonstrates an internal locus of control. Each of these students seems to have mastered the art of setting goals, creating strategies to reach the goals, and monitoring progress. Jenny is enrolled in a 5-year program which will culminate in a master's degree in elementary education with three specializations. Martha has always wanted to be an OB-GYN and is considering medical schools now. John is studying accounting with the goal of going to graduate school and becoming the chief financial officer of a company. Luke is planning on becoming a nurse but also eventually wants to pursue a Ph.D. in psychology. Michael wants to pursue a graduate degree to become a landscape architect. When asked if he was thinking about further education, he responded affirmatively, saying, "I'd just as well go for the gusto! I can't hit the stars if I don't at least shoot for the moon!"

Relationships and emotional support. With each of the students, it was evident that relationships and emotional support play a major role in their persistence in college. In his model of academic persistence and withdrawal, Tinto (1975, 1993) focused on academic and social integration within the institution. He claimed that students were less likely to drop out when they were integrated academically (academic and intellectual needs met), and socially (meaningful relationships with faculty and other students established). Other studies focused on the importance of informal contact between students and faculty, learning communities (Harrell & Forney, 2003; Pascarella & Chapman, 1983; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980), and mentoring (Sanchez, 2000; Wallace, Abel, & Ropers-Huilman, 2000).

Because the students interviewed are all members of Student Support Services, they already belong to a group. Several of the students rely on this network of relationships to provide the emotional support they need. Luke said, "She [the SSS advisor] doubles as my advisor and my personal counselor...Whenever I first came here, I had huge problems with depression." He continues to benefit from this relationship as a source of emotional support. A couple other students work in the SSS office and find that this is their "safe place."

Three of the students in particular have made an effort to get to know the professors so that they would not be viewed as "just a number," a fact of life on a large campus. Jenny said, "I'm such a dork in my classes. I sit in the front row and all my professors know me and talk to me outside of class. I think that makes a huge difference." Michael, one of the nontraditional students, has found that he is around the same

age as many of his professors, so he particularly enjoys having an open dialog with them, but not necessarily "being personal." Luke said, "If you can pick out one of the professors that you would think you'd enjoy getting to know, I would suggest you do it." Other students, such as Josh, will get help when they need it but don't otherwise seek to have a relationship with the professor. Josh said, "If I need help, I go to them. I don't know any of them really closely, but I'll talk to them occasionally."

Tinto's model tends to break down when speaking of nontraditional students whom Bean and Metzner (1985) describe as being part-time, commuter, older than 24, or any combination of these three characteristics. They assert that "whereas residential [traditional] students are primarily concerned with the internal environment of the institution, nontraditional students are much more closely connected with the external environment" (p. 492). This external environment would include finances, employment,

Most of the students rely on informal interaction on and off campus for their emotional support.

family, and outside encouragement. Thus the university social environment has a much greater impact on traditional than on nontraditional students who are most influenced by the external environment.

Three of the students interviewed would be classified as nontraditional according to Bean and Metzner's (1985) definition. Jill admits to struggling with the idea of friendships and socializing. She thinks she needs to make more of an effort to make friends but also does not have time for social events or establishing close relationships. Her main emotional support comes from Craig, her boyfriend, who also struggles to stay in school.

Jill said, "We haven't been able to really do that [socialize] because of time... Sometimes I wonder about having friends..." As stated earlier, both of these students had to drop out of school shortly after I interviewed them; it was, however, the external environment, primarily lack of finances and external support, which caused them to leave and not a poor campus social environment.

Only one of the students interviewed is involved in a campus organization outside of Student Support Services. Luke is the secretary of the "Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, Transgender Mountaineers Club." He has found friends and sup-

port through this group and enjoys the social gatherings. John isn't majoring in music anymore, but when asked who he hangs out with, he said, "Mostly still music majors." Most of the students rely on informal interaction on and off campus for their emotional support. This interaction might be with family members, a mentor, old friends from high school, classmates, dorm mates, church friends, or work associates. Martha attributes her emotional survival to one particular person, whom she called her counselor, and then later mentioned that he was actually her uncle and pastor. She said, "I talk to my counselor if I'm too stressed or there's a lot going on in my life. Not as far as school goes but people. Like if I'm having difficulty with one of my friends." The point is that these students do have a support system of relationships, but it is primarily informal. The traditional students are understandably more socially integrated, both formally and informally, on campus than the nontraditional students; however, because these traditional students are only a couple hours from home, they also continue to derive emotional support from their home environment. The Director of SSS summarized the importance of relationships, saying:

When we go out and talk to groups on campus (faculty, financial aid, etc), I almost always end with, "But our greatest attribute is that we are able to build one-on-one relationships with our students." That's really the biggest thing that I think we can do. They can get a lot of these services someplace else on campus—tutoring, academic advising—but they don't get personalized attention. (Copenhaver-Bailey, personal communication, December 2, 2005)

Communication of information. Cross (1981) identified three major relevant barriers to participation in educational programs: situational, institutional, and psychological. Lack of information was considered to be an institutional barrier but was later identified as its own barrier. Pascarella et al. (2004) incorporated the theory of cultural and social capital, concluding that students with college-educated parents have an advantage over first-generation students in terms of better understanding the culture of higher education and having access to essential knowledge and information.

The students interviewed are clear about the relationship between the access to and availability of information and the ability to afford college. I asked John if he had received the PROMISE Scholarship. He said that his counselor in high school kept telling him, "You're eligible

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for it, you're eligible for it." But they failed to tell him that he had to actually apply for it. He thought, understandably, that if he were eligible for it that he had received it and did not need to do anything about it. Unfortunately, because of this lack of communication, he missed the deadline and did not get the PROMISE Scholarship, which affects his college career.

Similarly, Craig claims that he received an agricultural scholarship to attend the university upon high school graduation but, because of insufficient help and information, was not able to use it. He feels that his financial troubles would have been significantly reduced if he had had adequate information regarding the financial aid process. He said, "There are people out there now who have never heard of financial aid... If they don't know that financial aid exists and people in high school aren't doing anything to help, how are they going to figure it out?" He has also struggled repeatedly with Veteran's Administration regarding financial aid issues; one time in particular, he found out too late that he would have been able to keep his financial aid by submitting a letter of appeal. Coming from his own experience, he made the emphatic statement "information is power!"

Jenny commented, "I think universities need to make the services more known. I think there should be services like SSS for people who aren't first-generation college students. It's just as intimidating." Jill spoke of the advisors at SSS, informing them of everything that SSS could do for them. She obtained help filling out financial forms as well as help with letters petitioning other university departments. At one point, Jill was going to have to pay back a grant because she was one credit short of the required 24 hours. She was able to get help from SSS and obtain an emergency loan which also gave her some additional money.

The importance of information doesn't relate only to finances, though. Sarah expressed appreciation to SSS for the information they have given her on graduate schools. She continued with, "The main thing... is try to pack as much information as possible in the orientation classes. A lot of students don't know that there's free tutoring, don't know there's an information desk; they don't know a lot of things." Michael wishes there was more information about nontraditional student groups. He said that he saw something in the paper once about a 30s and older group but has not seen anything since. He feels that most outreach programs are designed for younger students, possibly because the university thinks that older students know more about how to get help. He said, however, "I don't think they un-

derstand that sometimes we don't know where we need to go to get this help if we need it, or who to approach."

Discussion

The interviewed students show no indication of being at an academic disadvantage compared to other students whose parents attended college. Terenzini et al. (1996) describe first-generation students as, in addition to being low income, having weaker cognitive skills, holding lower degree aspirations, and being less involved in high school. Apart from being low-income, this description does not fit any of the students interviewed in this study. Most of the students excelled academically in high school, with some in the top 10%, and all of them but one have aspirations for graduate school. Conducting this study at the state's flagship university may be one reason the informants from this study do not match the literature; entrance requirements are higher at this institution than at local 4-year

Strength in one area can compensate for weakness in another.

and community colleges. As indicated earlier, the students who were interviewed tend also to be the higher achievers just by the fact that they voluntarily filled out a survey and donated time for an interview.

It is also important to note that research on first-generation students indicates that the failure to complete college preparation classes in high school, such as higher level math and science classes, is a significant barrier to success in college (Harrell & Forney, 2003). Some of the students in this study have mentioned that they did not feel adequately prepared by their high school experience; however, this lack of preparation has not emerged as one of the major factors affecting their ability to persist in college.

The themes which emerged from this phenomenological study coincide in many ways with Payne's (2005) research on poverty and the available resources, or lack of resources, which determine the extent of a person's poverty. She discusses poverty in terms of a distinct culture, not just a financial condition. As mentioned earlier, in addition to financial resources, Payne discusses seven other critical resources: emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, relationships/role models, and knowledge of hidden rules. In order to move out of poverty, a person needs a positive balance of these resources. Likewise, in order for a first-generation

student to succeed in college he or she needs a positive balance of very similar resources. Strength in one area can compensate for weakness in another.

Just as Payne (2005) tells of a woman who has close relationships to help her in a particular crisis, these students describe friends or a counselor who encourage them during a difficult time. As Payne enumerates the hidden rules that someone must know to survive in upper-class, middle-class, and lower-class culture, the students describe how vital it is to know the right information both in entering college and in persisting. In Payne's research and in the present research with first-generation students, money is certainly a deficit resource. However, money alone (or the lack thereof) is not the determining factor. The crucial issue is if the other resources will tip the balance enough to enable the person to succeed.

In the case of these nine first-generation Appalachian students, a follow-up e-mail to the Director of Student Support Services confirmed the findings of this research. As of September 2007, seven of the students are either completing their undergraduate degrees or are now working on master's degrees. The other two students, Jill and Craig, dropped out in January 2005 because of lack of money. As described in the research findings, these were also the two students who had the most deficits in other areas. In particular, they lacked significant encouraging relationships (outside of the commitment they have to each other). Both exhibited high internal motivation, but the lack of other resources was too overpowering and they were not able to persist.

The fact that most of the students have persisted is congruent with Tinto's (1993) research revealing that a student's likelihood of persisting is more strongly related to measures of ability than measures of socioeconomic status (p. 30). In Tinto's findings, the students' ability is the resource which offsets the lack of financial resources.

Recommendations for Practice

First-generation students are an often-overlooked, marginalized group. However, because they don't look different from other marginalized groups, such as Hispanics or African Americans, they often aren't perceived as needing help and so don't get it. The danger here, of course, is that once they are identified as a special group, they are labeled and stigmatized. This should be avoided. Rather, there should be a special effort to understand first-generation college students in a holistic way, recognizing the extra pressures

CONTINUED ON PAGE 14

that they may face in persisting in college.

When college instructors, advisors, and administrators are committed to a deeper understanding of the complexity of a first-generation college student's experience, they are prepared to take practical steps to help them. The following recommendations are not new or extraordinary, but they can make a difference:

- Adopt teaching methods that encourage student interaction and the development of relationships. These relationships are instrumental in student persistence.
- Encourage students to take advantage of tutoring and other academic support services. Programs such as Supplemental Instruction give the opportunity for building relationships outside of class and for reviewing course content. Mandatory academic support sections might be made part of first-generation students' program of study, especially during their freshman year.
- Make "human resources" available to students. Not only are relationships with other students important but also relationships with faculty and staff. Special clubs, organizations, and activities could assist first-generation students to integrate into campus life.
- Make every effort to offer consistent advising. If students have the same advisor, particularly in the first couple years, they should feel much more secure in their college experience.
- Forge cordial relationships between postsecondary institutions and high school counselors in order to ensure adequate communication of information regarding the college-going process. Consider setting up a liaison office for outreach to regional high schools to interact with potential first-generation students early in their secondary school years and help better prepare them to be admitted and transition into college.
- Know where to refer students for help and information on the college campus and in the community. Many problems can be solved by timely information.

Conclusion

Although this research was limited to one institution of higher education in the Appalachian region, the findings are universally relevant. First-generation students present new challenges to colleges and universities nationwide, particularly as ethnic populations grow. The

factors affecting academic persistence—family and culture, financial resources, availability of information, relationships, and internal locus of control—are aspects of every first-generation student's experience.


Developmental educators are likely to encounter a high percentage of first-generation students in their classes. These classes represent the students' first impression of the college or university, setting the tone for the rest of their academic career. It is thus imperative that developmental instructors appreciate students in a holistic way, recognizing the challenges unique to the first-generation experience and structuring the class in a way that relationships will be built. As students feel supported by the instructor and learn to support one another, they will be much more likely to succeed in their academic pursuits. Helping students to reframe their available resources, according to Payne's (2005) theory, is another way to approach students holistically; students may not have the perspective

*Helping students to reframe
their available resources...
is another way to approach
students holistically.*

to recognize how strength in one resource can compensate for weakness in another. Ultimately, developmental educators have the unique opportunity of making a very positive impact on the lives and academic careers of first-generation college students.

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